Surprise, as Usual

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Surprise, as Usual: Reflections on Five Months of Fieldwork on Personal Names and Renaming in Delhi

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This research project, which is supported by an Independent Social Research Foundation Early Career Fellowship with a supplementary grant from the British Academy, analyses the significance of naming and renaming practices in relation to caste and religion in India. Though frequently stigmatizing, caste names can be treated inventively: hidden, changed, or subject to revaluation. The project seeks to explore historical strategies of naming and renaming whilst also bringing the study squarely into the present: what can naming strategies tell us about Indian society in a time of expedited social transition? The aim is to synthesize and reinterpret existing approaches to the naming of persons in India whilst also developing original ethnographic case-studies focusing on three contested areas: low- and high-caste strategies of name-changing, Sikh reformist attempts to reinvigorate the religion's anti-caste sentiments through particular kinds of naming practices, and secularist, anti-caste activists' provision of 'secular names' such as the given name 'Sanketh' (Information) and surname 'No-caste'.

Well, the preceding lines, which paraphrase my original application to the ISRF, reflect my pre-fieldwork intentions for the project accurately enough, but the contingencies of fieldwork have a habit of derailing

or at the very least complicating one's original research questions in ways that can be frustrating, bewildering and creative in equal measure. One expects to encounter the unexpected (a phrase that remains at once hackneyed and percipient in anthropology); there is a disciplinary acceptance that things may change, that certain pathways integral to a research proposal may be closed off in the research context proper. Having now completed five months of intensive fieldwork on the subject it is apt to ask whether or not, or in what form, the above description still stands. What routes did field research take, both expected and unexpected?

First, a brief note on methods: Shore (1999, p.27) refers to qualitative research as a gloss that covers an assortment of 'promiscuous techniques and messy encounters'. Participant observation is one of these techniques. Put simply, participant observation is supposed to allow the researcher to examine phenomena through the eyes or from the perspective of participants through an active engagement in the lives of those participants. The researcher becomes an actor alongside other actors. The participant observer sees what 'they' see and does what 'they' do. For an anthropologist, the principal method of data acquisition utilised as part of his or her field research is usually participant observation[7] – an elusive method that has rarely been explicitly formulated.[8] Analogies have been sought to bring it into sharper focus: Karp and Kendall (2001), for instance, elaborate how participant observation has been likened to childhood socialisation – researchers are seen to learn in a similar way to children, since each group must learn to relate rules to context and ascertain the extent to which these rules are malleable (2001, pp.34-5). The technique has also been likened to second language acquisition. Both field workers and second language learners seek to acquire a type of knowledge that is not necessarily consciously held by those who hold it, and both groups similarly measure their success in regard to the public acceptance of their endeavours (*ibid*, p.38).

Participant observation tends to dominate people's perceptions of qualitative methods and can induce a feeling of insecurity in qualitative researchers who utilise other techniques. For example, the sociologist Sherryl Kleinman, whose study of an alternative health centre was based on interviews rather than participant observation, felt that her project lacked legitimacy because she was not doing 'real' fieldwork: 'Doing an in-depth interview project would feel like I'm doing half of what I'm supposed to be doing'

[7] A sustained period of field research, in the orthodox view, is an anthropological prerequisite. Watson describes the powerful lobby for which 'one cannot be an anthropologist without having undergone that *rite de passage* which is constituted by fieldwork' (1999, p.2). Shore compares this period to a tribal rite of initiation (1999, p.27). It was Malinowski, pioneering ethnographer of the Trobriand Islands, who enjoined the researcher to 'relinquish his comfortable position on the verandah' (1926: 146) and he was quickly followed by anthropologists such as Radcliffe-Brown (1922) who were driven by a dissatisfaction with short-term field research and speculative analyses of 'arcane' societies from a distance. The method was brought into sociology by the 'Chicago school' in the inter-war period and combined with quantitative methods, usually for the study of deviant and marginal social groups (Giulianotti 2001, p.86).

[8] Shaffir (2001) warns against following formulae of any kind, and recommends that the novice just 'hang around'.

(Kleinman *et al.* 2001, p.373). However, in the years that follow the pristine fieldwork year (or even 18 months) of an anthropologist's PhD – at a time when teaching, administration and family life usually restrict the would-be participant observer to a few weeks here and there – it is difficult to sink the kind of deep mineshaft that ideally prevails in participant observation. Interviews come to be relied on heavily. My experience reflects this: five months, in two instalments, was just long enough to enable a degree of participant observation, but the semi-structured interview became by far the most heavily utilised method. During this period I also voraciously read autobiographical accounts (and some fiction works) that addressed name changes – their authors' and others'. These helped me frame the questions I planned to ask (which centred upon the decision-making processes engaged in when people consider renaming themselves or others), but I came to experience this reading as an important component of fieldwork itself since the anthropologist's engagement with 'other people's engagement with their own social circumstances' is the very stuff of ethnographic research (Strathern 2014 [1996]). While on the one hand, systematic analysis of autobiographies and fiction borrows from literary criticism; that these texts comprise people's own reflexive ethnographies of themselves (Barber 2007) really couldn't make them any more anthropological.[9] In any case, Shore's point about methodological promiscuity is borne out.

As is so often the case, I found my non-textual informants via 'snowballing'. I began by contacting Dalit activists[10] whose contact details were publicly visible in literature (for example, campaigning pamphlets) and on the Internet. Though 'educated' and therefore hardly representative of the vast majority of Dalits, their 'uplift' activities took place in numerous Dalit localities and via these I was able to meet a reasonable cross-section of Dalits in the city. In addition to studying Dalit names, a further case study concerned the 'creeping Casteism' of Sikh family names, and here, since my partner is Sikh, I was able to begin the process of snowballing quite painlessly by starting with the family unit itself.

In addition to these expected routes that formed part of the original research proposal, a thoroughly unforeseen aspect of this fieldwork was my ending up in newspaper offices, talking with crime correspondents. This had to do partly with criminal aliases and their links with Bollywood cinema… However, one of my main interests here was in the pseudonym given to the victim of the harrowing rape of a woman that resulted in her death on a bus in Delhi in December 2012, a case that was internationally reported. Newspapers were unable to print her name due to a legal requirement of anonymity, and competed with one another to coin a pseudonym that would capture the imagination of the reading public. With a number of alternatives proffered, it turned out to be Nirbhaya, meaning someone who is fearless, that stuck. The *Times of India* took credit for the name, but it was also much criticised as a

[9] If I dwell on my engagement with texts here it is because anthropologists still sometimes look askance at what they see as over-reliance on textual analysis given the continued emphasis on face-to-face acquisition of data within the discipline (hence the vigorous debate about how to study online cultures: see Axel, 2006; and Miller and Horst, 2012).

[10] 'Dalit' is the self-chosen, politically correct term for those who are lowest in the caste hierarchy, replacing monikers such as 'Untouchable' and 'Harijan'.

sentimental trivialisation of the events it's now synonymous with. Through the contingencies of fieldwork, then, I thus became interested in the ways in which personal names and/or pseudonyms arise as matters of concern in the local and national media. Indeed, questions of naming seemed to be at stake in a variety of ways in the way the act of violation was discussed. A guru commenting on the case stated glibly that the victim should have addressed her attackers as brothers – then they would have desisted. One of the attackers was called Ram Singh, and various people I spoke with asked how someone with the name of Ram – a god's name – was able to commit such a crime. The theory that a name possesses constitutive power in respect of its bearer (i.e., the name *is* the person) is of course challenged by cases such as this. But the power of this theory of the name inheres in its continual failure continually being met with surprise.

As will already be clear, ethnographers are consummate opportunists, and it was talking with my partner's grandmother that I first noticed (why hadn't I noticed it before?) the tattoo of her own name on her lower arm. This was one of the 'surprises' of my fieldwork – the differential physicality of names. They don't just refer to an object/their bearer but often form interesting sensuous physical presences. This can be through bodily inscription in the form of tattoos, and as a result of the aforementioned conversation I found myself interviewing tattoo artists both at 'traditional' roadside markets where they are hereditary craftsmen, and in parlours in gleaming shopping malls where artists are from a quite different background. Names take on another sensuous presence in the way in which a name may *stink*. For instance, people speaking about Dalits may refer to the stench of those Dalit names that have not yet been hidden or changed to 'upper caste' ones. The stink of waste removal attaches to the names of those who have traditionally conducted this work.

I had not anticipated the importance of the materiality of the name – the different ways in which names may be made concrete and physically present. I suppose that I had been influenced by the ways in which names are mobilised in worship; viz. the repetition of a god's name is synonymous with *nirgun* worship (worship of formless god). The name is opposed to the personalism of the *form* of god (as in idol worship); the availability of God's name makes the god accessible to low-caste people who would otherwise be denied access to gods in concrete forms in temples. Yet what I found were names both sensuous and form-rich. The person I met who perhaps embodied the name more than any other was a tattoo artist plying his trade at a local Delhi market (he made most of his money from tattooing the names of police dogs on their inner ears). His body was a veritable assemblage of tattooed names, but unlike the Ramnami sect members in Madhya Pradesh who have the name of the god Ram tattooed in the Devanagari (Hindi) script all over their bodies (for spiritual protection and as signs of commitment), his body was a riot of his own name and the names of loved ones, in Roman characters and the Devanagari script, with initials and love hearts. Interestingly, though he was happy for me to take a photograph of his other tattoos, he was careful to conceal his wife's name. He had had her name inscribed on his body but

not in order for it to be seen by others. This is similar to attitudes in Yemen, where vom Bruck (2006) notes that it is indecent to reveal women's real names. This is because they have 'intrinsic potency like, for example, hair: thinking them and uttering them may arouse illicit desire'. Hence, 'camouflaging the female body involves more than veiling' (*ibid*, p.208). In the case of the tattoo artist, one gained the sense of his wife's name as a trace of her body on his, and thus to be concealed to all but the couple themselves. I found this surface declaration – which must at the same time be covered up – interesting as an interplay between elements of purdah[11] and visibilised romantic articulation beyond the mere alliance of families.

If one expects unexpected vistas of fieldwork to open up, one also expects to encounter certain difficulties and awkwardnesses. In anthropology, as in other disciplines, it is imperative to respond to the privilege of our informants making themselves available to and sharing confidences with us by offering them complete anonymity if they so desire. When the issue under investigation is personal names, this can present a particular challenge. One can look for structurally equivalent names to substitute for the 'real' ones, but sometimes the name in question is so idiosyncratic that this doesn't seem possible. If personal names are one's object of study – not just the name but the often extremely nuanced thought and weighing up of alternatives that enter into the decision to name or rename a person – but these names cannot be used, then it can seem that all one is able to provide is a few contextual details, thereby producing a real danger of blandness and/or accusations of non-specificity.[12] It might at first glance also appear that working out how to represent one's informants adequately when propriety concerning anonymity is even more important than usual is really a post-fieldwork issue, but in fact the matter was very much present during my fieldwork as well. I spent time, for instance, at the office of a notary specializing in name change who had a constant stream of visitors seeking guidance on the legal procedure. This was, of course, a potentially excellent opportunity to garner information about people's reasons for so doing, but given the often acute sensitivities concerning a person's name and purposes for changing it, I felt that my presence would be intrusive and unwelcome. On these occasions I instead tended to rely on the speculations of the notary who had 'seen it all before'. These were very interesting, but a quite different kind of data. On another occasion I sat interviewing a Dalit restaurateur in the front space of his restaurant as he recounted how he had changed his name to a caste-neutral one because if it were known he was a Dalit no one would ever eat there – his business would be finished. The setting was far too public for my liking, with the very real concern that customers would overhear this potentially calamitous chitchat. We did eventually continue in a backroom. Needless to say, it's incumbent on me to enact extreme care if I discuss the case in greater detail elsewhere, e.g. in respect of the restaurant's location. Countless similar examples could be given.

[11] The practice of preventing men from viewing women.

[12] A real problem for the anthropologist! For anthropologists, 'details explain the life forms of generalities' (Jenkins 2010, p.71).

To return to the proposal, then, there have evidently been a number of departures from my initial plan but the template was useful in allowing me to get to them, and still forms the basis of the book chapters I hope to write. I have of course barely scratched the surface of my fieldwork experiences: for instance, my interactions with astrologers who advise parents on naming their newborn children and numerologists who subsequently advise on renaming (correcting the astrologers' mistakes!) opened up a whole different set of issues, but I have tried to give a sense of the mix of methods, judgments and contingencies of this anthropological fieldworker who, not surprisingly, has been surprised.

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On Being an Ethnographer Despite Oneself

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My work on social movements never originally began as a research project, but because I was inspired by the movements and wanted to take part. I had long considered myself an anarchist in philosophical terms, but for most of my life, my occasional attempts to get involved in anarchist politics had been pretty desultory. Then, at the very end of 1999, I read a headline declaring 'Martial Law Declared in Seattle.' Like so many others I scrambled to understand what had actually happened, and was delighted to discover that while I had been busy writing my dissertation and working on my early teaching career, the sort of broad, open-minded, directly democratic, anarchist-inspired social movement I'd always wished existed had actually come into being. So I leapt in.

If one is in a radically new environment, and is used to playing the role of ethnographer, it's somewhat difficult *not* to keep playing this role. At meetings, there was always an official note-taker, or 'scribe,' and I was often named for the position. And half the people in the room were usually taking notes of some kind or another. I soon found that I was always taking notes, and that they were growing more and more detailed. Not only did my written observations attempt to reproduce the flow of conversation, but they also started to contain tallies and diagrams – a breakdown of participants by gender, circles showing where different people or sorts of people were sitting ('notice how the socialists and syndicalists[13] all cluster on one side of the room...') and observations about posture or clothing. Before long there were also little pictures of what sort of shoes people were wearing, and little asides about smoking habits ('why do so many vegans smoke? and notice how they so often don't bring enough tobacco and end up sharing

[13] Those who propose that capitalist industries should be re-arranged in syndicates or confederations.